

Masthead Logo

Archives Alive

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Hello, I Love You, and Goodbye

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The Serb and the Fox

By Girindra Selleck



The year is 1919. The Great War has just ended and nations across the globe are fraught with pain and loss. Nations of all sizes were dragged down into the toils of combat, beginning with the invasion of Serbia--one of the minor powers--and culminating with the later involvement of the United States--universally regarded as one of the heaviest hitters--in 1917. The war saw cultures and families alike split in two, either through disagreement

on the principles of the war, or through service contracts that were responsible for upwards of twenty million casualties worldwide. Being drafted to fight on the fields of combat was the most popular (and dangerous) way to serve your country, but it was far from the only.

As seen in the letter written by Michael Nikolitch addressing the wife of the recently deceased Dr. Walter H Fox, there were many other possible causes of death during this time--including, but not limited to, the deadly cold that would set in in the Northern reaches of Europe. Many of the best doctors had been recruited to serve as an aide to the soldiers fighting to protect the homeland, and those that were left were constantly overwhelmed by the amassing of sick cases in their locale. The combination of these two factors made it especially dangerous to contract any kind of illness during this

time, as both quantity and quality of service were constantly diminishing.



Image: Michael Nikolitch and Dr. Walter Fox

One of the most severe ramifications of World War One was not initially the most visible. Millions of youths from across the world were recruited into national service in one form or another--either to serve directly in combat, or indirectly as an aid. Anyone could fight in the army, but it was the educated university students who were used as personal assistants to professionals across an array of industries. Consequently, thousands of young peoples' educations were put on hold--if not altogether taken away. Our young friend Mr. Nikolitch was one of these individuals. At the ripe age of 21 he was plucked from his academic institution and brought to help Dr. Walter Fox in Europe.



The outside envelope of Nikolitch's letter to Mrs. Fox

Michael Nikolitch's letter to the new widow of Dr. Walter H Fox is at times charming, introspective, and deeply saddening. In the three page piece, Nikolitch goes from complimenting the beauty of the Fox's young daughter, Helen, in a recent set of pictures that Mrs. Fox sent, to ending his letter with a lamentation on how humanity is ultimately doomed to suffer, and our only desire as a race should be to get out of the current existence as painlessly as possible. Upon reading, one gets the feeling that the letter serves as a tour through Nikolitch's own conscience.

As the letter progresses from the more upbeat intro into the darker meat of it, which lies in the middle, one gains a clear insight into the psyche of the writer. He begins to detail the events of the war that occur in his homeland, Serbia, in the time that he and Dr. Fox are staying there, and the subsequent invasion on the Romanian front. After touching on the unfortunate death of Dr. Fox and the ramifications on both Mrs. Fox and little Helen, Nikolitch begins to reflect on his own misfortunes in his situation. He goes on to explain that before the war he was a student with dreams of completing his university degree in the past two years.

In what is possibly the most heartbreaking sentence in the entire piece, Nikolitch says "I should finish this school where I am now, two years ago, but I have lost that two years in the war." This segment alone captures the multifaceted heartbreak that was brought on by World War 1. Nikolitch uses broken English and simple terms to honestly convey his emotions to the widow Mrs.

Fox. His lack of a large vocabulary (aside from a few distinct phrases admittedly picked up during his time abroad) allows the intentions to speak volumes. With the English that Nikolitch does know, he tailors his letter to use very gentle language. Through this, we learn that he is both polite and compassionate in character, and wants to cause this family no further duress. This overarching tone of sympathy, paired with his comments on morality and the nature of life, give a solemn air to the texts.

After finishing the letter, one feels personally affected by it. The latter portion, in specific, serves to cause reflection of one's own purpose and existence. The sentence "The life is but a dream + nothing else + the man is a shadow, that is what I think of human creatures, + they are all created to suffer + nothing else, only in different ways, some one will last longer + some one shorter but all will follow Dr. Fox. I wish I did it already." closes the letter on a darker note, commenting on the expendable and futile qualities of human nature. One cannot help but deduce that this macabre world view is a direct byproduct of being forced into the throws of war.

Images of the letter:

6 - Novo Pazar Mt.
 Shabac - Serbia
 14-19-919.

Dear Mrs. Fox.

I was very glad to receive your letter with few beautiful photos in it, which I do like very much indeed.

Your little girl looks so pretty, like little darling, which English people says. I am sorry I could not find for her a dress (of our national dress) what Mr. Fox & I wanted very much, except few tools of our parents' work, what you ought to find in 'Mr. Fox' trunk.

Little Helen is charming little girl. The view of Mr. Fox is very good one too, & natural as well. Thank you ever so much for it. I will enclose photos of mine to. The small one is the only me, & the bigger one is a friend of mine & I too. The photos are not the very best ones.

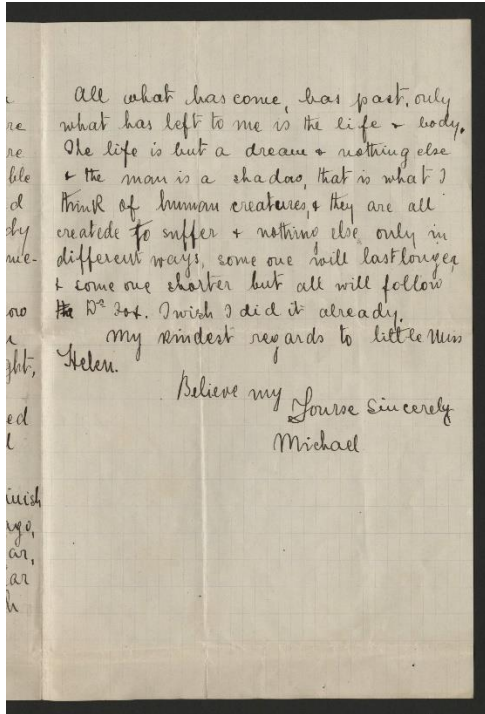
Michael Nikolitch's letter to Mrs. Fox (p. 1)

I am writing now to Semendria asking for a photo of the house where Mr. Fox & I stayed, & the room, where we roomed together, & if it is possible I hope to get & send to you too. I did not hear about the move of his body yet, but perhaps it will be if the Austrians want.

The fighting is stopped now in our country, except on Rumanian frontier, there we had some fight, but it is all over now.

You have asked me for my age. I am not satisfied in years as I am in experience. I think I am just 21 of age. I should finish this school where I am now, two years ago, but I have lost that two years in the war, otherwise, I should finish the second year of university, but still I hope to finish it for two years latter.

Michael Nikolitch's letter to Mrs. Fox (p. 2)



Michael Nikolitch's letter to Mrs. Fox (p.3)

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